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The Commodity-Form and the Dialectical Method: On the Structure of Marx's Exposition in Chapter 1 of *Capital*

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ABSTRACT: The last 10 or 15 years have witnessed a renewed interest in Marx's dialectical method and its implications for value theory. However, most works have not sufficiently thematized the peculiar role of the phase of analysis in Marx's dialectical investigation generally and in his presentation in particular. Furthermore, they have not paid sufficient attention to the specific form of the analytical process within dialectical thought, which distinguishes it from the kind of analysis characteristic of formal–logical methodologies. Those two questions are crucial for a proper comprehension of the dialectical structure of Marx's argument in Chapter 1 of *Capital* and, in particular, to clarify the determinate place where the unfolding of the explanation of the determinations of privately performed abstract labor as the substance of value is to be found. That explanation is actually contained in section 3, where Marx presents the synthetic development of the expression of value into the money-form.

IN THE PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION of *Capital* Marx makes evident that he was well aware of the complexity of the first steps in the critique of political economy (Marx, 1976a, 89). Indeed, the endless debates over the real meaning and implications of Marx's discussion of the commodity-form seem to suggest that, if anything, Marx's warning actually fell short of the real difficulties at stake. On the other hand, whether it is explicitly acknowledged or

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not, it is clear that the diverse readings of Marx's critique of political economy entail different political implications (Dimoulis and Milios, 2004). Although a full discussion of the question exceeds the scope of this paper, it should at least be noted that the investigation of those "minutiae" which the determinations of the commodity-form "appear to turn upon" (Marx, 1976a, 90) are of paramount importance for the kind of political action that the critique of political economy informs.[1] This is shown not only in Marx's insistence on the impossibility of correctly grasping the determinations of the more abstract social forms of capitalist society from the bourgeois standpoint of the science of political economy (Marx, 1976a, 174), but also in the central role these determinations played in his critique of the ideological representations of them coming from the working-class movement itself, *e.g.*, Proudhonian socialism.[2]

Be that as it may, the central point to be argued in this paper is that the diversity in the way Marx's followers have read the ideal reproduction of the determinations of the commodity-form contained in *Capital* is closely connected to the varied methodological perspectives from which those authors have attempted to grasp the latter. In other words, those different interpretations of the actual *content* of the first sections of *Capital* express different understandings of the very *form* of scientific knowledge unfolded in that book.

1 As I have argued elsewhere (see Starosta, 2003), elaboration of the connection between the specific dialectical form of Marx's scientific method and its revolutionary content is perhaps the single most important contribution of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*. A discussion of the fundamental political implications of the more abstract determinations of capital can be found in Starosta, 2005.

2 See Clarke, 1994 and Shortall, 1994 for good reconstructions of Marx's critique of Proudhonian socialism based on the latter's misunderstanding of the nature of the commodity and money-forms. Thus, the gist of Marx's critique of Gray's proposal to preserve private commodity-production while replacing the money-form with labor-time certificates issued by a national bank, comes down to the latter's inability to comprehend the immanent necessity of the value of commodities to take on the independent form of money (Elson, 1979b, 135–136). Similarly, in the *Grundrisse* Marx ridicules Darimon's proposal of abolishing the privilege of money (that of being directly exchangeable for all commodities) by making "by decree" all commodities directly exchangeable (Marx, 1993, 126). In all these cases, the common thread of the Marxian critique lies in the incapacity of those authors to grasp the *necessary* inner connection between the commodity- and money-forms. This, in turn, is underpinned by a *methodological* shortcoming. As I argue below, theories based on formal logic can only grasp social forms as self-subsistent entities or immediate affirmations and not as the self-negating mode of existence of a more abstract social form (*i.e.*, the movement of contradiction). As a consequence, they are bound to represent their necessary inner connections as merely external ones.

The need to reconsider Marx's presentation of the commodity-form in Chapter 1 of *Capital* through a reassessment of his dialectical method (in particular, its connection to Hegel's *Science of Logic*) has been widely recognized by a growing number of scholars. In effect, the last 10 or 15 years have witnessed a renewed interest in Marx's dialectical method and its implications for value theory (see, among others, Albritton and Simoulidis, 2003; Arthur, 2002; Moseley, 1993; Moseley and Campbell, 1997; Murray, 1988; Smith, 1990). However, despite all the light that these works have cast on the form of Marx's argument, I think that they have been mainly focused on the *synthetic* aspects of Marx's dialectical presentation (*i.e.*, on the exposition of the dialectical movement from the "abstract to the concrete"). In this sense, it could be argued that this literature has glossed over two further fundamental aspects of Marx's dialectical method. First, those works have not sufficiently thematized the peculiar role of the *phase of analysis* in Marx's dialectical investigation generally and in his presentation in particular. Second, they have not paid sufficient attention to the *specific form of the analytical process within dialectical thought*.[3] My own contribution therefore aims at filling these gaps in the literature.[4]

Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to provide a methodologically minded critical reading of Marx's argument about the determinations of the value-form of the product of labor in the first chapter of *Capital*.[5] Through this reading, I will also try to show that many of the confusions and misunderstandings among both followers and critics spring from an inadequate grasp of the dialectical structure of Marx's exposition.

3 The distinction between analysis (in the sense of dissection of the "whole" into "parts" or "identification of differences") and synthesis (in the sense of reconstitution of the "unity" of the whole) is not peculiar to dialectics. As I argue below, what sets the latter apart from formal–logical methodologies is the specific *form* taken both by the analytical and synthetic processes in dialectical thought. Zelený (1980, ch. 10) provides a concise discussion of the different meanings of analysis and synthesis in science and philosophy, which also traces back their intellectual lineage.

4 These other aspects have not been entirely absent in the literature. However, they came up in the debate among "new dialecticians" only quite recently (Murray, 2002; Reuten, 2000). See Brown, *et al.*, 2002, for a discussion of some of these issues through a comparison between critical realism and systematic dialectics. Also, it is my view that compared to the light thrown on the synthetic aspects of Marx's method of presentation, the nature of the relation between analysis and synthesis in the presentation and the way in which this relates to the formal determinations of the dialectical inquiry, have not been explored with the same clarity.

5 In my own reading I draw on the methodological approach to the critique of political economy developed by Iñigo Carrera (1992; 2003).

Analysis, Synthesis and the Dialectical Method: Controversies

In *Capital* Marx puts into motion the methodological discoveries which allowed him to overcome the limitations of his early account of alienated labor and its supersession. In contradistinction to the *Paris Manuscripts*, and as he clearly states in the *Marginal Notes on Adolf Wagner*, Marx takes as a point of departure neither the concepts of political economy nor any concept whatsoever (Marx, 1975, 198), in order thereby to discover alienated labor as their presupposition. As the title of his most important work denotes, the subject whose determinations the dialectical investigation proceeds to discover and present is *capital*, which, as the alienated subject of social life, becomes "the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society" and must therefore "form the starting-point as well as the finishing-point" of the ideal reproduction of the concrete (Marx, 1993, 107). In this sense, Marx's exposition in *Capital* does not advance towards the discovery of alienation but starts from what the analytic stage of the dialectical inquiry revealed as its most abstract and general form (Iñigo Carrera, 2003, 286; Meikle, 1985, 71–72).[6] He starts with the immediate observation of the simplest *concretum* in which the alienation of labor is expressed in order to develop the real determinations specific to this social form (Marx, 1975, 198). As has now been widely acknowledged, this starting point is not an ideal–typical — or worse, historically existent — simple commodity–producing society, as in the orthodoxy derived from Engels (1980) and popularized by authors such as Sweezy (1968) and Meek (1973).[7] In Marx's own words, he starts with the commodity as the "economic cell-form of bourgeois society" (Marx, 1976a, 90).

However, Marx's presentation does not directly start with the essential determinations of the commodity-form, but from the immediate observation of an individual commodity in its outward appearance.[8] In an exposition that will prove full of "metaphysical subtleties

6 On the methodological differences between the early critique of alienated labor in the *Paris Manuscripts* and its more developed form in *Capital*, see Starosta, 2005, chs. 1 and 4.

7 For a critique of the Engelsian orthodoxy on this question see Arthur, 1997; 1998; Robles Báez, 2000; and Reichelt, 1995.

8 Properly speaking, there is a previous step in Marx's presentation. He first starts with the form in which social wealth appears in capitalist society, namely, an "immense collection of commodities" (Marx, 1976a, 125), the individual commodity being its elementary form. The unfolding of the determinations behind this appearance is not completed until Volume II, where the unity of the movement of social capital itself, in the form of the circuit of commodity-capital, is revealed as positing social wealth in the form of an immense collection of commodities (Marx, 1978, 174–177).

and theological niceties" (Marx, 1976a, 163), he shows that what determines the commodity as a form of social wealth is not only that, as any product of labor, it possesses a use-value, but that the latter acts as the material bearer of a second attribute, namely exchange-value. The further analysis of the commodity reveals that exchange-value is actually the form of expression of a content distinguishable from it — the value-form, or the attribute of general exchangeability of the commodity — the substance of which resides in the abstract labor congealed in it, and whose magnitude is consequently determined by the socially necessary abstract labor-time required for its production.

The above line of reasoning has been the subject of all kinds of objections put forward by the different interpreters of Marx. As I argue below, those reservations about Marx's argument have their source in an inadequate comprehension of, or insufficient attention to, the nature of the crucial distinction between two different moments involved in Marx's dialectical inquiry and presentation, namely the stage of analysis and that of synthesis. In particular, I think that it is confusion over these questions that lies at the basis of widespread critiques of Marx's line of argument about the determinations of the commodity-form; not only by well-known critics such as Böhm-Bawerk (1975), but also among some of Marx's disciples.[9] In brief, the general thrust of those objections goes, Marx did not provide in *Capital* an adequate "logical proof" that commodities have a "something" in common and that that "something" is congealed abstract labor.[10]

9 Thus both Reuten (1993, 107) and Arthur (1993, 76) agree that Böhm-Bawerk's objections to Marx's line of reasoning about abstract labour as the substance of value are justified; not because Marx is wrong in seeing an inner connection between abstract labor and value, but because his grounding of that point is defective from a "systematic–dialectical" perspective. Unlike Arthur, who argues that the introduction of abstract labor as the substance of value should have been postponed until the development of the capital-form, Reuten goes even further in his distance from Marx's presentation and makes a case against the determination of abstract labor as *substance* of value. Rather, he sees the market as transforming concrete labor into abstract labor (Reuten, 1993, 105).

10 A good and concise account of the essence of this critique can be found in Kay (1979, 48–58; see also Park, 2003). Specifically, Böhm-Bawerk objected that Marx did not take into consideration common properties other than being products of labor — *e.g.*, utility, scarcity, and so on — as possible determinants of exchange-value (Böhm-Bawerk, 1975, 74–75). In this sense, it might be worth noting that in the process of *inquiry* Marx did consider — but discarded and, hence, excluded from the *presentation* — "utility in general" as the substance of value. This is evidenced by the following remarks from the preparatory Manuscripts of 1861–63:

"We have seen that the basis of value is the fact that human beings relate to each other's labor as equal, and general, and in this form social, labor. This is an abstraction, like all human thought, and social relations only exist among human beings to the extent that they think, and possess this power of abstraction from sensuous individuality and contingency.

The first point at stake in this objection has already been forcefully made by other scholars, so I will refer to it very briefly. In a nutshell, the question comes down to the radical methodological difference which, as Meikle insightfully notes, separates Marx's dialectical approach to science from the formalism and atomism of bourgeois conceptions (Meikle, 1985, ch. 3). Clearly based on the latter, Böhm-Bawerk's objections came from someone who could only see science as a purely "logical construct" and not the reproduction in thought of "how things essentially are" (Meikle, 1985, 80). Thus, with "the characteristic empiricist gap between 'truths' and the entities they are supposed to be true of" (Meikle, 1985, 79), he could only read Marx's initial pages as an abstract, formal process of "logical proof." The possibility that those pages unfold the real nature and specific self-movement of a determinate content (the commodity-form of the product of labor) and do not contain a formal deduction was beyond Böhm-Bawerk's formalistic field of vision (Kay, 1979, 51–52).

Second, and more important for the purpose of this paper, at stake here is another aspect of Marx's argument in the first pages of *Capital* that has not been sufficiently or satisfactorily explored by most scholars: the specific nature and significance of the difference between the phase of analysis and that of synthesis within a dialectical exposition. This double movement in the dialectical *presentation* is not an arbitrary stylistic or rhetorical strategy introduced by Marx but reflects a real difference characterizing the specificity of dialectical *inquiry*. The latter must involve *both* identification of the different forms taken by the subject whose determinations the dialectical investigation attempts to reproduce in thought (*i.e.*, the *analytical* separation between social forms according to their relative degree of concreteness) *and* the "tracking down of their inner connection" (*i.e.*, the *synthetic* discovery of the immanent real necessity linking those

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. . . We have seen that the basis of value is the fact that human beings relate to each other's labor as equal, and general, and in this form social, labor. The kind of political economist who attacks the determination of value by labor time on the ground that the work performed by 2 individuals during the same time is not absolutely equal (although in the same trade), doesn't yet even know what distinguishes human social relations from relations between animals. He is a beast. As beasts, the same fellows then also have no difficulty in overlooking the fact that no 2 use values are absolutely identical (no 2 leaves, Leibniz) and even less difficulty in judging use-values, which have no common measure whatever, as exchange values according to their degree of utility" (Marx, 1988, 232).

different forms) (Marx, 1976a, 102).[11] A fundamental implication follows from this: the exposition of the *explanation* proper of the necessity underlying the relations between different social forms — what would amount to a "logical proof" in the language of formalistic methodological approaches — is not to be found in the dialectical *analysis*, but in the *synthetic* movement of the exposition. Now, since it is in the latter only that the unfolding of the real movement of determination — hence the explanation — actually takes place, the presentation of the findings of the dialectical inquiry could take, in principle, a fully synthetic form (Iñigo Carrera, 2003, 279). However, this is not the way Marx structured his dialectical exposition in Volume 1 of *Capital* (the only one he edited for publication himself); this exposition tends to include, in a "stylized" form, brief presentations of the analytic process.[12] Since this peculiar structure of Marx's presentation of the determinations of the commodity-form actually recurs throughout most of Volume I and its misunderstanding has caused so many controversies among critics and followers alike, it might be worth providing further elaboration on this last point.[13]

In a nutshell, this structure of Marx's dialectical presentation starts by taking the immediate concrete appearance of the determinate social form at stake. Through a brief analytic movement, it subsequently uncovers its inner essential determination.[14] The exposition

11 Here my approach differs from both Murray's and Reuten's. The former seems simply to identify inquiry (what he calls "phenomenology") with analysis and synthesis with presentation (Murray, 2000, 36–38). Reuten does allow for synthetic moments in the process of inquiry but only as "provisional outlines of inseparability of phenomena" (Reuten, 2000, 143). Moreover, although he is right to see the need for the dialectical presentation to be fundamentally synthetic, he does not fully explore the possibility that the dialectical researcher presenting the results of the inquiry may include "stylized" moments of analysis in order to highlight the unity of the dialectical process of cognition. He only mentions this possibility in passing when discussing Banaji's argument about the two-fold starting point of chapter 1 of *Capital* (Banaji, 1979, 36–40; Reuten, 2000, 158). But as I argue below, this presentational strategy plays a central role at least in the whole of Volume I.

12 On the role and the pros and cons of this analytic moment in the peculiar structure of the dialectical exposition in *Capital* I, organized around presentational "nodes," see Iñigo Carrera, 1992; 2003, 285.

13 For an illustration of this presentational structure with reference to the transformation of money into capital, see Starosta, 2005.

14 Marx sometimes includes *apparent* (hence flawed) analytical paths in his exposition that are revealed to be such through a movement that leads the reader back to the unmediated starting point, that is, without making any progress towards the discovery of the underlying specific determination defining the object under scrutiny (Iñigo Carrera, 2003, 282). The presentational role of the inclusion of these flawed analytical movements is mainly pedagogical; they serve to place more emphasis on the correct analytical path.

then proceeds by synthetically unfolding the realization of that (more abstract) determination. This stage goes on until the specific potentiality defining the essential determination of the social form under scrutiny, and whose realization the exposition is ideally reproducing, negates itself as immediately carried by that abstract social form to become affirmed as immediately pertaining to the more concrete form into which it has metamorphosed. This signals that the first presentational node has been exhausted. A new one thereby begins, but now with the more concrete form whose genesis has been traced in the former as the subject of the movement to be ideally reproduced. However, the new node does not directly start with the inner determinations of this more concrete social form but, again, with its immediate manifestation. An analytic movement therefore precedes the former.

Coming back to our main argument about the general aspects of this formal structure of Marx's presentation: as mentioned above, it is the exposition of the *dialectical synthesis* that reveals the "why" of real relations. The analytic stage only separates a social form from a more abstract one, whose realized potentiality it carries within itself in the form of its own immanent potentiality. In this sense, the analytic stage is not about the *why* but about the *what*. Evidently, since the separation of social forms according to their relative degree of abstractness/concreteness ideally expresses the objective necessity (the real relations) residing in the object and are not the product of the subjective caprice or imagination of the scientist, the mere reference to the "what" carries implicitly some hint of the "why." Thus, if the dialectical analysis reveals that the value-form is the concrete form in which the objectification of the abstract character of private and independent labor affirms itself as an abstract form, the separation between the two already says something about the real relation involved. But this something is no more than, as it were, a "pointing out," an

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Marx's consideration of the possibility that the particular material properties of the commodity under investigation constitute the more abstract form behind the attribute of general exchangeability is an example of this (Marx, 1976a, 127–128). Incidentally, it is to be noted that this is the real meaning of what Böhm-Bawerk mistakenly saw as Marx's "method of exclusion," through which he allegedly provided a "purely negative proof" of abstract labor as the substance of value (Böhm-Bawerk, 1975, 68–69).

observation. The actual ideal reproduction of that inner connection — the explanation — takes place in the synthetic movement.[15]

With this in mind, it is easy to understand the main reason why the criticisms leveled at Marx about his inadequate *explanation* of abstract labor as the substance of value are not simply based on a misunderstanding about the particularities of his argument, but are completely off the mark. To put it simply, those critiques search for an explanation in the wrong place, that is, in the pages where Marx is just presenting the analytic separation of real forms, which comprise the first two sections of Chapter 1. Marx's alleged explanation of why abstract labor is the substance of value in those pages sounds unconvincing simply because it is not there. As we shall see, the unfolding of this particular "why" only occurs in section 3, which discusses exchange-value as the form of manifestation of value. Before engaging in that aspect of Marx's presentation of the determinations of the commodity-form, let us first probe more deeply into the *specifically dialectical* form of the analytical moment that precedes it.[16]

15 In his *Science of Logic*, Hegel refers to this distinction between the role of analysis and synthesis as the difference between the *apprehension* of what is and its *comprehension* (Hegel, 1999, 793–794).

16 Regarding Chapter 1 in particular, this presentational structure has been broadly recognized quite early in the debate by Banaji (1979) and Elson (1979b). However, they both seem to reduce the content of the synthetic stage of the presentation simply to the question of revealing exchange-value as the necessary mode of expression of value, i.e. to the *formal* necessity of the money-form. But as I argue below, the latter is precisely the moment where Marx is synthetically unfolding the necessity of privately performed abstract labor as the substance of value. Yet, neither Elson nor Banaji explicitly addresses the question of where exactly the "why" of abstract labor as the substance of value can be found. Elson in particular seems to concur with Rubin (see below) that it is actually in section 4. Murray (1988, 148–149) rightly sees the structure of Chapter 1 as comprising a "double movement" of form to content and then from content to form. However, presumably reducing the dialectical movement to the synthetic stage, he sees nothing particularly dialectical in the *form* of the first movement (Murray, 1988, 148); hence his analogy with Descartes' analytical reduction of the bit of wax to primary quality matter, *i.e.* a search for a "third party" or common element (Murray, 1988, 149). In reality, the general point about the two-fold movement of analysis and synthesis in Marx's exposition had already been made by Rubin in his seminal work on the theory of value (Rubin, 1972, 113). However, his understanding of the way they structure the exposition is, I think, incorrect. In a nutshell, Rubin considers that the content of the section on fetishism is what in reality corresponds to the section on the form of value or exchange-value, *i.e.* the synthetic exposition of the reason why the product of labor must take the value-form. Furthermore, although Rubin does distinguish between the analytic and the synthetic (genetic, as he calls it) stages of the presentation, he also seems to restrict the specificity of the dialectical argument to the latter (Rubin, 1978, 110). In this way, the specific form of the dialectical analysis *vis-à-vis* the analysis of formal logic is overlooked.

The Phase of Analysis

In order to understand the specific form of Marx's argument in the first pages of *Capital* it is fundamental to grasp the difference between the dialectical form of the analysis and that of formal logic. Many authors have highlighted the distinction between the abstractions of Marx's critique of political economy and those of conventional social science.[17] However, as Iñigo Carrera points out (2003, 250), most authors have overlooked that the difference in the respective kinds of abstraction emerges as a result of the very *form* of the process of cognition on the basis of which those abstractions are identified. This difference in form not only applies to the synthetic or genetic phase — as is usually assumed — but *crucially pertains to the process of analysis as well.* Theories based on formal logic analyze a concrete form by separating what repeats itself from what does not in order to arrive at a certain characteristic. In turn, this common attribute makes possible the mental construction of a definition of that concrete form as that which has this or that attribute. Conversely, dialectical thought analyses a concrete form by, first of all, facing it as embodying a qualitative potentiality for transformation. Second, by grasping that qualitative potentiality as the concrete form in which a more abstract form realizes its own qualitative potentiality, *i.e.*, its real necessity. Thus the dialectical ideal appropriation of the universe of different real forms does not proceed through an identification of the distinctiveness of forms on the basis of the degree of repetition of certain attributes. Rather, it analytically separates the different forms by discovering as immanent in a particular concrete form the realized potentiality of another real form, which is abstract with respect to the first one, but concrete with respect to another form of which it is the realized potentiality. Hence, while formal–logical analysis grasps the general determination of real forms as immediate affirmations — hence self-subsistent entities — the distinctive mark of the process of analysis in dialectical research is to grasp, *in the same analytic movement*, both the concrete form under scrutiny and the more abstract one of which the former is the developed mode of existence. In other words, dialectical thought grasps each form

17 The distinction has been posed in the literature as one between "real abstractions vs. mental generalization" (Saad-Filho, 2002) or "empiricist abstractions vs. determinate abstractions" (Gunn, 1992). "Empiricist abstractions" have also been called "formal abstractions" (Clarke, 1991) or "general abstractions" (Murray, 1988).

as the affirmation through self-negation of another, more abstract one (hence, as the movement of contradiction).

In light of the above, I think that in the opening pages of chapter 1 Marx is not searching for a common property in commodities. Rather, he is searching for (*i.e.*, not yet unfolding) the specific determination defining the potentiality of the commodity as a historical form of social wealth. This potentiality Marx initially "discovers" by looking at the use-value of the individual commodity, which in capitalist societies acts as bearer of that second, *historically specific* attribute of the products of labor, namely, *exchange-value*. Two things follow from this. First, that inasmuch as it is materially borne by the use-value of the commodity, this attribute is *intrinsic* to the commodity itself. Second, as argued above, Marx is not *trying to prove logically the existence of a common property* but *the commodity itself*, in its immediacy, shows that it *has* that "common property" *immanent* in it.

Here a problem might arise because Marx does not explicitly say what that second attribute of the commodity consists of. He just names it (exchange-value) and then directly proceeds to its analysis. I believe the reason for this is that the meaning of that attribute was self-evident in the name itself in light of its everyday usage at that time. The fact that commodities have "exchange-value" simply means that they have the *power of exchangeability*, that is, *the aptitude to be transformed into a different use-value without the mediation of any material transformation in bodily existence*.[18] What immediately follows in Marx's exposition is, then, the *dialectical analysis* of this social power of exchangeability of commodities. That is, Marx proceeds to locate the source of this specific potentiality intrinsic to the commodity, *i.e.*, the more abstract form appearing in the concrete form of the power of exchangeability.

As happens with every real form, the first thing he encounters when facing the exchangeability of the commodity is its *immediate manifestation* — the quantitative relation "in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another" (Marx, 1976a, 126). Thus, the first step in the analysis of exchangeability is the uncovering of the *more abstract form* (hence the *content*) behind that specific formal attribute of the commodity, this being the only way in which we can penetrate through the concrete form in which an abstract

18 I am indebted to discussions with Juan Iñigo Carrera (personal communication) for this formulation of the fetishistic character of commodities.

form presents itself. Again, this is the immediate object of Marx's exposition in the passages that follow, and not the search for a "common something" or "third thing," the existence of which the distinction between form and content presupposes.[19] This separation between form and content reveals that the different *particular* exchange relations that a commodity establishes with other commodities are actually expressions of something else that inheres in commodities and which gives them the identical *qualitative* potentiality of *general exchangeability* in a certain *magnitude*. Once form and content of the attribute of general exchangeability are distinguished, Marx continues with the analysis of the latter, which consists in separating that form of general exchangeability from the more abstract form whose realized necessity it carries within itself as its "other." The particular form that this analysis takes is, again, not the search for a common element, but for the determinate action which posits that specific attribute existing in commodities. After briefly considering and discarding the action of purely natural forces, Marx points out that the action at stake is a *human* action in one of its facets: productive labor in its general character, or abstract labor. Commodities have this attribute of general exchangeability as products of the abstract character of the labor objectified in them.

And here there is a tricky aspect in Marx's presentation, which might have contributed to much of the confusion. Because, although at that stage of the argument he has already shown that the common "something" is the form of general exchangeability, he does not actually *name* it until separating, in turn, that form from its material content or substance.

> All these things now tell us is that human labour-power has been expended to produce them, human labour is accumulated in them. As crystals of this social substance, which is common to them all, they are values — commodity values [*Warenwerte*].

19 In order to avoid confusions, I am not implying that the existence of a common property and of exchange equivalence are not important elements of Marx's arguments. My point is that Marx is not *logically proving* the existence of a common property or that the only possible substance of that common property is abstract labor. He "*finds*" that common property immanent in the commodity (actually, its immediate manifestation) and then proceeds to its *dialectical* analysis (*i.e.*, separation of form and content). See Kicillof and Starosta, forthcoming, for a fuller discussion of why being the products of the abstract character of labor is the only reasonable determination behind the value of commodities.

We have seen that when commodities are exchanged, their exchange-value manifests itself as something totally independent of their use-value. But if we abstract from their use-value, there remains their value, as it has just been defined. The common factor in the exchange relation, or in the exchange-value of the commodity, is therefore its value. (Marx, 1976a, 128.)

That intrinsic attribute of general exchangeability which is manifested in exchange-value, and which is posited by the abstract character of labor, is called by Marx *value*. Now, in opposition to the claims of a great deal of contemporary literature on Marx's theory of the value-form, I think that the (analytic) search for the specific determinations of the commodity is not achieved with the discovery of abstract labor as the substance of value.[20] Quite to the contrary, that very specificity seems to have slipped through Marx's fingers. In effect, although he found the specific attribute of the commodity in its value, when he moved to account for its substance he ended up with something that bears no specifically capitalist character: "merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labor, *i.e.*, of human labor power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure" (Marx, 1976a, 128). But, as Marx's "thought experiment" about Robinson on his island illustrates (Marx, 1976a, 128), it is evident that in any form of society human beings productively expend their corporeal powers and that the exertion of human capacities entails both a concrete or

20 As a reaction to the ahistorical, Ricardian reading of Marx's account of the value-form, the "new consensus" tends to see abstract labor as a purely historical, specific social form (Arthur, 2001; Bellofiore and Finelli, 1998; De Angelis, 1995; Kay, 1999; Postone, 1996; Reuten, 1993; Saad-Filho, 1997). For a further elaboration of our case against the pure historicity of abstract labor through a critique of Rubin's approach, see Kicillof and Starosta, forthcoming. As I argue below, abstract labor is a generic material form, a "productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands etc." (Marx, 1976a, 134). What is specific to capitalist society is the role it plays in being determined as the substance of the most abstract form of objectified social mediation, namely, value. In a recent article, Murray (2000) comes very close to recognizing this through the distinction between "physiological" abstract labor and "practically abstract" labor. A proper discussion of Murray's own solution exceeds the scope of this paper. Here I would only like to note that Murray's remarkable merit is to grasp the importance of highlighting the *materiality* of abstract labor while making clear that this does not necessarily lead to an asocial perspective on the value-form. In this way, his recent contribution to the debate provides a necessary correction to what we see as a formalist overreaction of much recent theorizing on the value-form. See also Reuten's reply to Murray (Reuten, 2000) and the latter's rejoinder (Murray, 2002). While still seeing abstract labor as capital-specific, Robles Báez offers probably one of the best treatments of the *movement of the contradiction* between the generic, physiological materiality of abstract labor and its historically specific *social* determination as the substance of value deriving from the private character of labor in capitalism (Robles Báez, 2004).

particular character and an abstract or general one. What is more, Marx states explicitly that it is not from labor's abstract aspect that the fetishism of commodities derives (Marx, 1976a, 164). Thus far, then, this stage of the analytic process does *not* show *why* this generic materiality takes the objectified social form of value. It does not even tell us *what* is the historical form of social labor that is determined as value-producing. It *only* tells us *what* is the *material* determination of that which in capitalist society is *socially* represented in the form of value. This is why Marx still carries on with the analytic search for the "*formal determinants* that it contains as a commodity and which stamp it as a commodity." This leads Marx's dialectical analysis to give closer scrutiny to the labor that produces commodities. As any attentive reader could tell, the analytic process continues and it is only in the section on the dual character of labor that Marx finally finds the historically specific form of social labor that produces commodities and, hence, value.

In effect, Marx observes that the individual commodity he is analyzing is only one among many within a totality of different commodities. But the same follows for the particular labors that underlie the varied use-values taking the commodity-form. In other words, Marx points out that generalized commodity production presupposes the existence of an extended social division of labor and that the latter, as the "totality of varying deployments of useful labor" is an "eternal necessity of nature for the sake of mediating the material interchange between man and nature (*i.e.*, human life)" (Marx, 1976b, 12). On the other hand, this analysis also makes clear that the reverse relationship does not hold, that is, the division of labor must not necessarily take the social form of the production of commodities. The formal determination of the commodity must therefore spring from the specific social form taken by the organization of the division of labor in our present-day society. The commodity, Marx eventually concludes, is the objectification "of mutually independent acts of labor, performed in isolation" (Marx, 1976a, 131). In other words, it is the "labor of private individuals who work independently of each other" (Marx, 1976a, 165), or *private and independent labor* (hereafter, private labor), which constitutes the specifically capitalist form of labor. In this social form of the human life-process, the producer has the full conscious productive capacity to control the individual character of his/her labor but cannot recognize and organize (*i.e.*, he/she

is unconscious about) the social determinations of human individuality. Hence the inversion of those social powers into an attribute of the product of labor, namely, the value-form. The analytic process completes the search for the specific determinations of the value-form by revealing that the attribute of general exchangeability of the commodity springs from the abstract or general character of *privately performed* labor materialized in it. The commodity, then, becomes known in its essential determination as the *materialized general social relation of private and independent producers.*

The Synthetic Phase

It is only now that the synthetic stage of the presentation begins. This consists in ideally following the realization of the discovered potentiality immanent in the commodity. From then on, the commodity ceases to be grasped in its exteriority as an "inert" social form — as a sheer external object — and the exposition starts to follow its self-movement as the subject of the development of those determinations — previously discovered through analysis — into ever more concrete forms (Iñigo Carrera, 2003, 283).[21] This is subtly indicated by Marx at the end of his discussion of the qualitative determinations of the relative form of value.

> We see, then, that everything our analysis of the value of commodities previously told us is repeated by the linen itself, as soon as it enters into association with another commodity, the coat. Only it reveals its thoughts in a language with which it alone is familiar, the language of commodities. In order to tell us that labour creates its own value in its abstract quality of being human labour, it says that the coat, in so far as it counts as its equal, *i.e.*, is value, consists of the same labour as it does itself. In order to inform us that

21 In a recent article, Arthur (2004, 41–42) also acknowledges this important aspect of Marx's presentation. However, he still maintains that Marx failed to provide in Chapter 1 an adequate explanation for the determination of abstract labor as the substance of value and should have postponed the introduction of abstract labor until the level of abstraction of the capital-form (Arthur, 2005, 119). The shortcoming of this view — also shared by Lapavitsas (2005) — is that it leads to a formalistic understanding of the value-form, which obscures the very question that the latter, in its own reified way, is meant to solve: the establishment of the material unity of social labor when it takes the form of private labor (Brown, 2004). This idiosyncratic separation of the form of value from its substance at the level of the commodity-form had already been advanced by Itoh (1988). See Clarke, 1989, for a critique of Itoh's radical separation of the theory of the form of value and the theory of the substance of value.

its sublime objectivity as value differs from its stiff and starchy existence as a body, it says that value has the appearance of a coat, and consequently that in so far as the linen itself is an object of value [*Wertding*], it and the coat are as like as two peas. (Marx, 1976a, 143–144.)

The unfolding of this movement spoken "in the language of commodities" is precisely what the subsequent synthetic stage of the presentation consists of. Value being a purely social power of the commodity, it cannot be immediately expressed in its sensuous corporeal materiality. As the capacity of the commodity to be exchanged for other different commodities, value can only be manifested in the social relation of exchange between commodities. Therefore, the value of a commodity necessarily expresses itself only in the use-value of the commodity that is exchanged for the commodity in question as its equivalent. In this way, value takes the concrete shape of exchange-value as its necessary form of appearance. In its most developed form, value acquires independent existence as money and the expression of value in the particular commodity acting as money becomes determined as price. The opposition inherent in the commodity is thus externalized through the doubling of the commodity-form into ordinary commodities and money. The power of direct exchangeability of commodities negates itself as such to become affirmed as a social power monopolized by the money-form.

It is in the course of the synthetic movement of this development, when seen from the point of view of its *qualitative content*, that the answer to the "why" questions which the analytic stage was impotent to provide is given. In other words, it is the development of the expression of value that unfolds the explanation as to why the objectification of the abstract character of privately performed labor takes the social form of value or, to put it differently, why private labor is value-producing.

In a nutshell, the issue comes down to the fact that it is only the expression of value that progressively reveals to us the problem that the commodity-form of the product of labor is meant to solve. We are referring to the mediation in the establishment of the unity of social labor when performed in a private and independent manner. And since this unity becomes condensed in the money-form, it is the unfolding of its determinations, synthesized in the peculiarities of the equivalent-form and derived from its general determination

as the form of immediate exchangeability, that provides the answer to the question as to why private labor must produce value.

As the other side of its two-step analytic discovery, the synthetic ideal reproduction of the determinations of the value-form comprises two aspects, each one respectively corresponding to the second and third peculiarities of the equivalent form. The first one, whereby the concrete labor that produces the particular commodity acting as general equivalent becomes the form of manifestation of the general character of human labor, shows, precisely, why that material expenditure of labor-power has to act as the social form of labor, *i.e.*, why the *abstract* character of labor is the substance of value. The second one, whereby the private labor that produces the equivalent commodity becomes the immediate incarnation of directly social labor, in turn makes it evident why private labor must produce value at all.

In effect, through the general expression of value, all commodities relate to each other as possessing an identical social essence as exchangeable things in the same magnitude. In other words, albeit in a mediated form that reflects their social form of value as the immediate attribute of the general equivalent, their social relation of general exchangeability achieves its unity. But, since they are only values as expressions of the same common social substance, *i.e.*, abstract labor, the unity of the expression of value puts us before the unity of *undifferentiated* human labor. In determining the concrete labor that produced the equivalent as the immediate mode of appearance of abstract human labor, now the social relation between commodities itself makes plain that the different concrete labors that produced them are but different ways in which the total labor-power of society has been expended. Those varied useful labors now show themselves to be what they actually are: differentiations of the expenditure of human labor-power or determinate modes in which the human body has been productively exerted. In this "roundabout way," as Marx puts it, the development of exchange-value confronts us with the generic problem that any society must confront, namely, *the social regulation of the differentiation of human labor*, which "is capable of receiving each and every determination . . . but is undetermined just in and for itself" (Marx, 1976b, 20), and which is necessary for the reproduction of human life. The exposition of the dialectical analysis of the commodity had already discovered that a commodity-producing society presupposed an extended division of labor. Now

we can see that the materialized social relation itself — the value-form — *affirms itself as the mediator* in the articulation of that division of labor, *i.e.*, in establishing the relation between different labors as organic specifications of human labor in general.

> As *values* the commodities *are* expressions of the *same unity*, of abstract human labour. In the form of *exchange value* they *appear* to one another *as values and relate* themselves to one another *as values*. They thereby relate themselves at the same time to abstract labour as their *common social substance*. Their *social relationship* consists exclusively in counting with respect to one another as expressions of this social substance of theirs which differs only quantitatively, but which is qualitatively equal and hence replaceable and interchangeable with one another. . . . It is only the kind of thing that can turn mere objects of use into *commodities* and hence set into a *social* rapport. But this is just what *value* is. The *form* in which the commodities *count* to one another as values — as coagulations of human labour — is consequently their *social form*. (Marx, 1976b, 28–29; italics in original.)

The necessity of abstract labor as the substance of value thus becomes finally unfolded. Abstract labor is the substance of value not because a logical argument says that it is the common property of commodities we were searching for in the name of sound principles of logic. It becomes determined as the substance of value because *in reality* value is the objectified social form that mediates the organization of that purely material expenditure of the human body into its different concrete forms across society. This being what the value-form mediates, what else could be represented in that objectified form? On the other hand, abstract labor does not cease to be a generic material form because of this determination as the substance of value. Hence, as stated above, the determination of labor as abstract labor is not the reason behind its existence as value-producing. What is specific to capitalist society is that this purely material form negates itself as simply such to become affirmed as the producer of the (objectified) general social relation (Iñigo Carrera, 2003, 301). Once objectified, the *generic materiality* of the abstract character of labor plays a particular social role in the process of social metabolism by being represented as the *social objectivity of value*.

> The commodities' social form is their relationship to one another as *equal labour*; hence — since the equality of *toto coelo* [utterly] different labours can

only consist in an *abstraction from their inequality* — their relationship to one another as *human labour* in general: expenditures of human labour power, which is what all human labours — whatever their content or mode of operation — actually *are*. In each social form of labour, the labours of different individuals are related to one another as human labours too, but in this case this *relating itself* counts as the *specifically social form* of the labours. (Marx, 1976b, 32; italics in original.)

To recapitulate, thus far we have discussed how the development of the expression of value and, in particular, the unfolding of the determinations of the second peculiarity of the equivalent-form, contains the account of the reason why *abstract labor* is the substance of value. What still needs to be answered is why abstract labor *is the substance of value*. In other words, we have to see why human productive activity becomes determined in capitalist society as value-producing, the second step in the synthetic movement referred to above.

In the same way the third peculiarity of the equivalent immediately follows from the second one, so does the answer to this question follow from the previous one. In effect, as the social incarnation of human labor in general, the concrete labor that produces the equivalent acquires in its immediacy the form of equality with respect to the other concrete useful labors. In this form of immediate identity with every other concrete labor, the labor that materializes in the general equivalent is manifested as *immediately social*, while the useful labors producing the rest of commodities cannot manifest this social character in their immediacy. Thus the expression of value in the form of exchange-value puts before us the reason why the organization of the division of labor must necessarily be mediated in this reified form or, what is the same, why commodity-producing labor is essentially value-producing. Although materially dependent upon one another as part of the "primordial system of the division of labor," this irreducibly social character of *private labors* is not immediately manifested when they are actually objectified in the direct process of production. Hence, this necessary social articulation of private labors is realized through the mediation of the exchange of the products of private labor as commodities. Only at that moment is it revealed whether the expenditure of the portion of social labor which each producer personifies is socially useful. This is the reason why the social character of the privately performed individual productive activities is specifically rep-

resented as a determinate objective attribute of the products of labor: the form of their general exchangeability or their value-form. The basis of this reified social mediation thus resides in the fact that the unity of social labor is manifested, as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, only *post festum*, through the exchange of the products of labor (Marx, 1993, 172). Furthermore, the unity of social labor thus becomes socially represented in the form of the particular private product that the rest of commodities separate as their general equivalent and which eventually ossifies in the money-form. In tracing the genesis of the latter through the ideal reproduction of the expression of value, the synthetic stage of the dialectical exposition thereby positively unfolds the determinations of that which the analytic process could only *point out*: that the value-form of the product of labor is the materialized social relation of human beings and, therefore, the *social subject* of the *form* of the social process of production of human-life.[22]

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to contribute to the growing literature on the dialectical structure of Marx's critique of political economy by bringing out often-overlooked aspects of his argument in Chapter 1 of *Capital*. First, by briefly highlighting the distinction between Marx's view of science as the "ideal reproduction of the real life of the subject matter" and the formalism characterizing mainstream methodological approaches, I established the precise nature of Marx's discussion of abstract labor as the substance of value which, I argued, does not involve a *purely deductive* process of *logical proof*.

Second, the paper brought out the respective roles and significance of the stages of analysis and synthesis in the dialectical presentation and, in addition, addressed the question of the *specific form* of the analytical process in the dialectical method. I believe this latter point in particular has not been sufficiently addressed in the special-

22 Hence, the fetishism of the commodity-form could be said to be formal inasmuch as it only pertains to the *form* of the process of social metabolism, its content remaining the production of use-values and, hence, of human life. At the level of the capital-form the fetishism becomes substantive because it refers not only to the form of the human life-process but also to its *content*. As an attribute of capital, the alienated content of social reproduction becomes determined as the production of surplus-value, with the production of use-values, hence human life itself, as the unconscious result of its autonomized movement.

ized literature. Still, I hope to have demonstrated that it is essential to grasp why many of the objections to the initial steps of Marx's argument are simply misplaced and based on a reading that sees the analytical movement unfolded in those pages through the lenses of formal–logical methodologies. These general methodological insights were then utilized to clarify the determinate place in Chapter 1 of *Capital* where the unfolding of the *explanation* of the determinations of *privately performed abstract labor* as the substance of value is to be found. This is *not* in the first two sections of Chapter 1, as most critics of Marx have tended to assume. But neither is it in section four on commodity-fetishism, as many Marxists (perhaps influenced by Rubin) usually think. As argued in this paper, the *synthetic* unfolding of the reason why the abstract character of private labor constitutes the substance of value can be found in *section 3*, where Marx presents the formal development of the expression of value into the money-form.

In sum, we can now appreciate that the dialectical "minutiae" involved in the uncovering of the determinations of the commodity-form have far-reaching theoretical implications for the comprehension of the first steps of the critique of political economy.

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